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Pentagon Acts to Curb Science Parley Papers

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WASHINGTON, April 7 — The Defense Department has told the sponsor of a technical symposium to be held here this week that it must cancel the presentation of about a dozen unclassified research papers because the information might help the enemies of the United States.

In addition, the department has ordered the sponsor, the Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers, to restrict the audience that attends the presentation of two dozen other technical papers that are also not classified.

The Pentagon has contended in this case and others like it that it has the authority to limit distribution of information under the Export Control Act, which bars the export of sensitive technology without a license. When speeches and papers are involved, the Defense Department has said that the presence of foreign scientists in the audience could lead to unauthorized export of information.

The legal authority asserted by the Government has never been challenged in court, said Allan Adler, legislative counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union. But leading universities and professional associations have objected to the restrictions, and have been working with Pentagon officials in trying to resolve the conflict.

Sensitive Issues Involved

The scientific and engineering work of members of the photo-optical society are of special interest to the Pentagon because of their application to such areas as lasers, communications with submarines by way of satellites and the use of satellites to assure compliance with various nuclear treaties. The bulk of the research conducted by members of the society and others like it is financed by the department.

In August 1982 the Pentagon surprised many American scientists and engineers when it demanded the withdrawal of more than 100 papers from a symposium organized by the same organization.

A senior official of the 6,000-member association, who asked not to be identified, said in an interview over the weekend that negotiations were still under way about the exact restrictions that would be required.

"The Defense people see themselves at war, while most of the rest of us think we're living in a peacetime environment," he said. "Some people feel the restrictions damage the United States by curbing the exchange of information needed for research. The Pentagon disagrees."

The Pentagon's last-minute decision to impose restrictions on the papers at the forthcoming symposium has renewed concern among some of the nation's leading scientific and engineering associations about the Reagan Administration's continuing effort to restrict the flow of information that has not been declared a military secret beyond United States boundaries.

Just Friday, for example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Academy of Science and the National Academy of Engineering called an unannounced meeting at which about 35 representatives from various professional groups discussed what steps, if any, they should take in response to the Pentagon's information policies.

A participant at the meeting, Robert L. Park, a professor of physics at the University of Maryland, would not comment on what was said at the session. However, he said it was his personal opinion that the Pentagon efforts were damaging American interests by inhibiting the free exchange of ideas.

One important focus of the meeting, several participants said, was the Pentagon's decision late last week to sharply restrict the presentation of papers at the weeklong conference of photo optics experts.

Another matter discussed by the participants was the recent decision of several professional groups to close their meetings to foreign scientists because of their uncertainty about Defense Department policy.

Though no position was adopted, one official attending Friday's session said there was discussion about whether the professional groups should attempt to develop a unified policy concerning the Pentagon's efforts to restrict the dissemination of research papers that are not classified.

Position of Pentagon

Defense Department officials have contended that the flow of scientific information overseas through the open discussion of scientists and engineers has damaged the strategic position of the United States in its relations with the Soviet Union.

Critics of the department have responded that the open exchange of information is an important reason why the United States is a world leader in scientific research and that the technical advantages said to have flowed to the Soviet Union through the presentation of unclassified material have been exaggerated.

Mr. Adler, the civil liberties counsel, charged the Defense Department with "bullying" the scientific community. He also said the department's decision to either cancel papers or require the society to restrict attendance at sensitive sessions appeared to conflict with the Pentagon's announced policy. He cited a recent statement by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger that the department had "a longstanding policy regarding the open nature of unclassified basic research and have encouraged the free and open exchange of such information through all channels, including presentation at open conferences."

Mr. Adler added that many of the basic policy issues involved in the continued tension between the department and scientific community may be resolved in export control legislation, which is soon expected to be considered by both house of Congress.